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**Participation in sport as a mechanism to transform the lives of young people within the  
criminal justice system: an academic exploration of a theory of change**

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## **Abstract**

Sport is often framed as a panacea for social disharmony, especially within the context of marginalised youth populations, and is widely promoted as a mechanism through which a multiplicity of social policy objectives can be achieved. Yet while political rhetoric has long pointed towards sport's transformative abilities, the basis for such claims remains unproven. Theory-based approaches to evaluation have been posited as a useful device to explore the impact of specific initiatives and indicate where best practice may operate. The aim of this paper is to highlight one such theory-based framework that has been devised by practitioners in recent years around the operationalisation and evaluation of sporting interventions in criminal justice settings and which has come to be adopted as the dominant 'theory of change' across sport and criminal justice practitioner settings in the UK, but has, as yet, eluded academic scrutiny. To address this omission, the present discussion offers an in-depth analysis of this framework with the aim of discerning more clearly 'what might work' within sport and criminal justice contexts. In turn, the paper aims to stimulate further academic debate around the instrumental role of sport within criminal justice and the value of such frameworks for both policy and practice.

**Keywords:** Sport, criminal justice, marginalised youth, policy, theory of change.

## Introduction

Participation in sport and physical activity is often promoted as an avenue through which a number of wider social policy objectives can be achieved. Several scholars have indicated how this assumption has misguidedly positioned sport as a panacea for addressing social disharmony, and holds particular resonance in engaging marginalised and disenfranchised youth populations (see Sandford *et al.*, 2006; Coalter, 2007; Armour *et al.*, 2013; O'Donnell *et al.*, 2019). Included within the extensive list of outcomes that could potentially be attained by utilising sport in this manner are the facilitation of citizenship (Waring & Mason, 2010; Parker *et al.*, 2017), decreased unemployment (Henry, 2008), the development of more resilient communities (Misener & Doherty, 2012) and anti-social behaviour and crime reduction (Nichols, 2007; Sandford *et al.*, 2008; Parker *et al.*, 2014).

Within the realm of youth justice, numerous government policies and strategies have heralded the utilisation of sport as a plausible and vital mechanism through which young people can be rehabilitated or dissuaded from engagement in criminal activity (see Collins & Kay, 2014). However, as Room (2013) observes, the 'success' of such interventions in meeting their stated objectives varies markedly, particularly since they are typically plunged into institutionally complex environments comprising multiple stakeholders who have the potential to block, re-direct or reinforce the impact of an intervention in accordance with their own organisational priorities and preferences. As such, the ontological complexity (Cairney, 2012; Room, 2013) created by the interactions and interpretations of various practitioners and policy-makers often leads to confusion in evaluating how policy interventions are deemed to have 'worked' (Pawson, 2013).

Participation in sport and physical activity may indeed possess the necessary qualities to bring about change to the lives of those deemed ‘at risk’ of engagement in criminal activity. However, in order to garner the evidence to support these claims, some have suggested that a more epistemologically sophisticated array of evaluative frameworks might be utilised (Pawson, 2006; Room, 2013), which address current methodological limitations in relation to policy design and evaluation (Crabbe et al., 2006; Sandford, et al., 2006; Coalter, 2007). Moreover, in doing so, evaluations may gravitate towards the pursuit of ‘intelligent policy’ (van der Knapp, 2004, p.30) and draw attention to the diversity of stakeholder interests and interpretations.

Of the various methodological approaches that are available to generate evidence to inform policy and programme design, recent attention has turned towards frameworks that evaluate both the mechanism and context under investigation in addition to programme outcomes (Pawson, 2006; 2013; Room, 2013; Fox *et al.*, 2017). Epitomising theory-based approaches to evaluating policy interventions and programmes (Weiss, 1997; Pawson, 2006; 2013; Fox *et al.*, 2017), these frameworks hold the potential to offer a richer, more nuanced, yet practical appreciation of the programmes under investigation and alter the focus of enquiry towards a question of ‘what is it about this programme that works, for whom [and] in what circumstances?’ (Pawson *et al.*, 2005, p. 22). Consequently, theory-based approaches to evaluation have been posited as a useful device to explain the impact of specific initiatives, to indicate where best practice may operate within programme design and/or where caution about the efficacy of certain mechanisms (like sport) should be exercised (Pawson, 2013).

The aim of this paper is to present and analyse one such theory-based framework that has emerged across the UK sport and criminal justice sector in recent years, but has eluded

academic scrutiny. This framework, which has been driven entirely by practitioners, is focussed around the operationalisation and evaluation of sporting interventions in criminal justice settings (see Figure 1) and has come to be adopted as the dominant ‘theory of change’<sup>1</sup> both by practitioner groups and government representatives in those settings.

[Insert Figure 1 about here].

Following an overview of how the theory of change emerged and how it has since been applied, the paper provides a critical exposition of the merits of theory-based approaches to evaluation. This is followed by an academic analysis of the sport/criminal justice theory of change which offers an in-depth analysis of this framework with the aim of discerning more clearly ‘what might work’ within this specific context.

While the academic development of theories of change is evident in related literature (see Pawson, 2006; Coalter, 2013) rarely do these reach practitioner audiences. Rarer still are academic analyses of practitioner-led theories of change, where academics are afforded the opportunity to contribute to their applied development. Therefore, a central aim of the paper is to stimulate further academic debate around the instrumental role of sport within criminal justice settings and the value of such frameworks for both policy and practice.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Fox, Grimm and Caldeira (2017) ‘theory of change’ is an approach that is widely utilised by practitioners across various sectors to both plan and evaluate programmes or interventions. This approach consists of stating the long-term change (or transformation) that is desired/envisaged by a particular programme or intervention and articulating the assumptions (and logistical steps) that underpin the enabling of such change (see, for example, Armour and Sandford, 2013).

## **Overview and derivation of the sport and criminal justice theory of change**

The sport and criminal justice theory of change (ToC) originally began to emerge in 2013 amongst a group of key stakeholders (practitioners) who met regularly to discuss ‘best practice’ in their working environments<sup>2</sup>. All had significant experience of the sector, be that in custodial or community settings, and a number represented key UK-based organisations such as governing bodies of sport and major charities. In addition (and periodically), the group sought input and advice from government representatives and academics working in related areas – amongst whom were the second and third authors. Meeting quarterly over a three year period, the group drew up various iterations of the ToC and in 2016 commissioned an organisation with expertise in developing ToC concepts and ideas to formalise the framework which had organically emerged in the interim. This was published and circulated as a working model across practitioner audiences in 2017 (see Figure 1).

In simple terms, the sport and criminal justice ToC depicts a diagrammatic overview of the mechanisms that the key stakeholders considered to be necessary when utilising sport as a deterrent to criminal or anti-social behaviour. According to the professional logic of those involved (Pawson, 2006), desistance from crime will occur when the initial contact with the sporting activity leads to a deeper, more involved engagement from which relationships of trust and acceptance with activity leaders can be developed. This logic goes on to imply that these relationships provide a platform upon which the individual development of the participant can be built and which may lead to further opportunities in education, training and employment. Importantly, the theory of change proposes that pursuing such pathways will necessarily deter or negate engagement in crime and anti-social behaviour. Whilst not exclusive to this audience,

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<sup>2</sup> This group was co-ordinated and facilitated by the National Alliance of Sport for the Desistance of Crime (<https://allianceofsport.org>).

the theory of change was designed initially for use by practitioners working across criminal justice settings, involving those engaging young people ‘at risk’ of offending, those already engaged in criminal activity, and/or those with experience of custody<sup>3</sup>.

### **Positioning the argument for theory-based evaluation**

Contemporary policy and programme design have increasingly been predicated on and informed by an evidence-base (Pawson, 2013; Fox et al., 2017). At the heart of this movement is the need to evaluate and locate the aspects of policy interventions that demonstrate a propensity to affect desired change—or to put it more simply, address the question of ‘what works?’ (Weiss, 1997; Sanderson, 2002; Biesta, 2007). Critics of the preoccupation with evidence-based practices argue that some social policy areas are more suited to this technocratic, top-down approach to policy design than others, and that adopting simplistic questions such as ‘what works’ is both unhelpful and insufficient to improve professional practice and arbitrate on policy decisions in social policy sectors replete with complex human interaction (see Biesta, 2007). Nevertheless, evidence-based policy-making has gained traction in recent years as a mechanism to support contemporary approaches to government, not least in the social policy domain of sport (Palmer, 2013).

Whilst a level of consensus exists regarding the centrality and importance of evidence as the mechanism to drive policy and programme design, of greater contention is agreement on the ‘optimal’ methodological approach by which to generate appropriate evidence to inform design processes. Whilst a multiplicity of methodological positions have been proposed and adopted to examine policy interventions, modern government, with its predilection for accountability,

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<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, the theory of change has been applied, both nationally and internationally, to inform (among other activities) a physical activity intervention for the prison environment (UK and Argentina); a ‘street soccer’ initiative (Scotland and USA); drug enforcement approaches in the USA; and the development of cultural activity for Jamaican nationals residing in Los Angeles (USA).



governmentality, and target-driven management (Dean, 2010), has tended to err towards positivistic approaches whereby evidence is based on simple ‘cause and effect’ conclusions, through the utilisation of quantitative methods and measures (House, 2006; Pawson, 2013). Central to the privileging of this more objective and ‘scientific’ methodology is its ability to generate repeatable, objective evidence which can be measured and scrutinised against rigorous, accepted standards (Murray *et al.*, 2008). Consequently, this ‘methodological fundamentalism’ (House, 2006, p.93) has come to act as a normalising function to establish positivistic enquiry as the dominant episteme (Murray *et al.*, 2008) thereby encouraging the rest of society to accept this methodology as the common-sense approach to evidence creation.

Whilst legitimate in their own right, such positivistic frameworks are often only concerned with the reporting of outputs or ‘killer facts’ on which to premise further programme design (Coalter, 2007; Fox *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, while the procedural uniformity and transparency that positivist methodologies afford has obvious appeal to policy-makers (Pawson, 2006), competing viewpoints contend that this ‘hard science’ approach is limited in its ability to capture adequately the complexity, intangibility and elusive nature of the policy context (see Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Room, 2013; Fox *et al.*, 2017). For Room (2013), attempts to evaluate social policy interventions in this way are at best approximations, and, at worst, artificial and misleading as they fail to capture the breadth and complexity of the contextual issues inherent in many interventions. Therefore, as Cohen *et al.* (2007) conclude, such attempts to simplify, restrict and control variables offer a ‘pruned’ or ‘synthetic’ view of social life, whilst allowing for the ‘messiness’ of human subjectivity, so visible in social policy design, to be metaphorically sidestepped.

As an alternative framework by which to evaluate or design intervention programmes, theory-based approaches have been proposed, which attempt to understand the conditions under which a programme intervention or policy is likely to work (Weiss, 1997). The key point of difference here is that the focus moves beyond merely uncovering connections and correspondences between inputs and outcomes (Pawson, 2006; Room, 2013) to examining the ‘conditions of programme implementation and mechanisms that mediate between *processes and outcomes*’ (Weiss 1997, p.41, emphasis added). To this end, by examining the generative mechanisms of an intervention, or the aspect(s) of an intervention programme that are deemed to be necessary or sufficient in contributing to desired outcomes (Pawson, 2006), theory-based approaches address the assumption that certain outcomes (good or bad) must solely rest with the efficacy of the programme (Pawson, 2006).

For Weiss (1997), theory-based evaluation (TBE) may enable the production of robust evidence to offer more detailed and nuanced insight for programme designers, on the principle that TBE has potential to penetrate the ‘black box’ of a policy intervention and identify specifically where and how the intervention has contributed to outcomes (Carvalho & White, 2004). On this premise, theory-based approaches present a ‘double-edged sword’ of being able to assist retrospective analysis of programme efficacy, whilst offering a prospective function, and contributing more rigorously to inform programme planning (Weiss, 1997; Fox *et al.*, 2017). This duality takes particular prominence when first, the outcomes of a programme are not readily observable or difficult to measure (Carvalho & White, 2004) and, second, when the programme itself engages a multitude of stakeholders, all of whom have an interest in the policy intervention either as policy designer, implementer or recipient (Weiss, 1997). Crucially, then, while more traditional forms of evaluation control for, or even obliterate, human interference (Pawson, 2006), theory-based approaches account for multiple interpretations of programme

policy and recognise that the resultant outcomes of intervention programmes are at the behest of a multitude of active agents, all of whom possess the power to constrain or facilitate the path of an intervention (Cairney, 2012; Room, 2013; Fox *et al.*, 2017).

While some authors would argue that accounting for such complexity offers little value or substance to policy evaluation (see Sanderson, 2002; Cairney, 2012), ignoring the complexity and diversity of the multiple actors who cohabit the policy landscape from the evaluation process overlooks the contingencies of specific policy interventions, not to mention the political, economic and cultural struggles that encompass the policy terrain (Room, 2013). As Room (2013, p.237) observes, no policy intervention is launched in isolation—as positivist approaches, for example, would have us believe—thereby suggesting that attempts to generate a rigorous evidence-base for policy outcomes and impact must ‘take full account of the political economy and distribution of power within which struggles over the future of the social and political order are being waged’. By bringing multiple stakeholders into the evaluation process, theory-based approaches have the potential to create a substantially more complete depiction of the impact of policy interventions and generate more rigorous evidence in comparison with more traditional (and often preferred) evaluative frameworks.

As noted, the rationale for TBE surpasses the search for evidence founded on outcomes and is instead, predicated on an intention to elicit a deeper understanding of the specific combination of circumstances that contribute to such outcomes (Pawson, 2006; Room, 2013). Consequently, the aim of TBE is not to generate technical or partisan support for policy ideas *per se*, but to enlighten the thinking of policy-makers by examining the potential of policy (both positive and negative) to invite debate, discussion and reckoning rather than present ‘thumping fact’ (Pawson, 2006). Drawing upon Weiss’s (1997) notion of ‘knowledge creep’—

whereby the findings of policy research percolate into the minds of policy-makers (Sanderson, 2002; Pawson, 2006)—policy design becomes grounded in conjecture, sense-making and discourse, with evidence deployed into these discussions to persuade and illuminate.

Despite the clear rationale and obvious benefits that TBE may accrue, this methodological approach is not without its problems. More specifically, theory-based frameworks have been decried for the manner in which the utilisation of theory, as the source of programme design and evaluation, constrain or oversimplify the ‘promise’ that any policy intervention can articulate (van der Knapp, 2004; Fox *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, a simplicity-complexity dichotomy (Stufflebeam, 2001) is created which may impede endeavours to ‘distinguish the significant from the trivial’ (van der Knapp, 2004, p. 19). A second, related, critique asserts how the practice of theory-based design and evaluation often foregrounds the voices of the ‘local elite’ (Carvalho & White, 2004) to distort the evidence which is generated. Critics argue that such foregrounding occurs most prevalently when the development of programme theories are founded upon the professional logic of those at the apex of the intervention hierarchy (van der Knapp, 2004), as opposed to those situated at the margins of the policy implementation chain. Finally, given that the origins of theory-based evaluation are premised on the development of concisely stated programme theories (Weiss, 1997), the propensity of policy makers to devise indecisive, misguided or ill-informed objectives and outcomes for policy interventions to attain further questions the utility of theory-based approaches (van der Knapp, 2004). Indeed, within the territory of sport-based interventions, the inclination of policy-architects to overstate the palliative capacity of sport to address numerous social dilemmas (Dacombe, 2013) may lead to evaluations conducted on elementary, simplistic, partial, or even erroneous thinking (Weiss, 1997).

As a riposte, proponents of theory-based approaches acknowledge the inherent technical and conceptual challenges that exist, yet suggest that their circumvention can be performed by enquiry which is shrewd, flexible, agile, welcoming of contextual complexity and able to bridge the tensions between real-world practitioners and policy-makers (Pawson, 2006; Room, 2013)—the hallmarks of theory-based evaluation. Indeed, as Pawson (2013) contends, no methodological framework is able to vanquish all aspects of a complex intervention to present the ‘silver bullets’ that policy-makers thirst. Consequently, for van der Knapp (2004), policy makers have a moral duty to pursue *intelligent policy*, whereby policy design is focused upon influencing social development in a well-considered and well-balanced manner, by remaining true to focal objectives and drawing attention to the context-specific diversity of stakeholders’ interests and preferences.

### **Sport and criminal justice – what we ‘know’**

Since the 1960s, political rhetoric and policy in the UK has increasingly promoted sport as a tool for tackling youth delinquency, this despite there being little definitive evidence to support the assumption that sport is effective in reducing youth crime (Coalter, 2007). Concerns regarding methodological rigour and statistical reliability, as well as benefits gained versus programme costs, have resulted in questions being raised about the likely impact of sporting interventions on recidivism (Smith & Waddington, 2004). Despite this, it has been demonstrated that sport is successful in addressing proximal risk factors for youth crime (Hodge, 2009), for example in poor social and interpersonal skills (Ravizza & Motonak, 2011), negative peer groups, poor use of leisure time (Schafer, 1969; Nichols, 2007) and psychological wellbeing (Ekeland *et al.*, 2005). In this sense, physical activity and sport can be seen to be an effective means through which to engage young people in activities that they dislike, or would

typically be reluctant to participate in through conventional means, such as classroom based educational (Sharpe *et al.*, 2004) or rehabilitative work (Nichols, 2007; Lewis & Meek, 2012a).

Nichols (2007) argues that sport has the potential to reduce youth crime in three main ways: (i) as a distraction or as a surveillance mechanism, (ii) as cognitive behavioural therapy; and (iii) as a 'hook' or a relationship strategy. Nichols advocates the embedding of sports projects within community sport development principles so as to ensure that they are sufficiently and appropriately mobilised to achieve the wider social objectives of the community and partners concerned. That said, available evidence suggests that sport alone is not sufficient to combat youth crime (Coalter, 2007), but that it can work effectively if intervention occurs before delinquent behaviour sets in (Farrington & Welsh, 2007), and/or when packaged alongside a range of other support structures to minimise socialisation into criminal/anti-social behaviours (Muncie, 2009). Collectively, such research findings highlight the extent to which both the personal and social aspects of sport may positively impact marginalised young people by promoting attributes such as confidence, self-esteem and a range of pro-social/interpersonal skills whilst at the same time having the capacity to nurture a sense of citizenship amongst excluded groups (Muncie, 2009; Morgan & Parker, 2017).

There is a plethora of evidence documenting the benefits of sport for young people (Ekeland *et al.*, 2005; Busseri, 2010; Quarmby, 2014), a growing evidence base regarding gains associated with sport and physical exercise for incarcerated populations (Buckaloo *et al.*, 2009; Martos-Garcia *et al.*, 2009; Meek, 2013) and a recognised potential for sport to be utilised as a vehicle for promoting rehabilitation among young offenders (Lewis & Meek, 2012a). Yet, in contrast to community initiatives, the deployment of sport with young people in custody has received relatively little attention. Juveniles (under 18 years old) and young adult offenders

(18-21 years old) have the highest rates of participation in physical activity of any incarcerated population in England and Wales (Lewis & Meek, 2012b). In the case of the former, this is, at least in part, attributable to Physical Education being a compulsory element of educational provision for those of school age in custody in England and Wales (Meek, 2013). Furthermore, related policy stipulates that such provision must offer accredited qualifications, promote the constructive use of leisure time and address offending behaviour, whereas such elements are discretionary with regard to provision for adults (Ministry of Justice, 2012).

Hence, whilst sport alone should not be seen as a panacea to youth crime, it is widely recognised as a valuable means by which to provide an initial point of engagement and subsequent psychosocial benefit for those within custodial settings. Moreover, while practitioners, politicians and academics alike have often promoted sport with young offenders for educational and rehabilitative purposes, prisoners themselves rarely express such motivations for engaging in physical activity (Martos-Garcia *et al.*, 2009). Consequently, it is important to explore participant perceptions of sporting intervention in custody in order to assess their potential to impact the decisions that young people make in terms of their attitudes and approaches to life within prison and beyond.

### **Developing a theory of change for desistance from crime through participation in sport**

In this section, we consider a theory of change which captures the programme logic associated with the contribution of sports-based interventions to the desistance of crime (see Figure 1). Whilst we recognise that what we present in this section is far from a complete depiction of the programme theories and logic attached to sport's contribution to this aspect of social policy, our intention is to initiate further academic debate in this area, invite refinement of these initial considerations, and, ultimately present a theory of change which may form the basis and

theoretical parameters for future research. In doing so, and in the spirit of van der Knapp's (2004) pursuit of intelligent policy, we hope to offer a framework through which the theoretical underpinnings of such sports-based interventions can be defined, so that programmes can be designed, developed and evaluated more rigorously and investment decisions based on a stronger evidential basis (Coalter, 2013; Pawson, 2013; Fox *et al.*, 2017).

Foremost in this process is, as Coalter (2013) reminds us, the necessity to shift the perspective through which the theory of change is developed away from families of programmes (such as those related to sport and crime desistance) towards families of mechanisms which capture the 'processes, relationships and experiences that might achieve the desired [programme] outcomes' (p. 607); in this case desistance from crime. Literature points to a variety of protective factors, which, if present within a particular context, may moderate the factors which lead to crime and anti-social behaviour (see Gambone & Arbreton, 1997; Witt & Crompton, 1997; Farrington & Welsh, 2007; Muncie, 2009; Coalter, 2013). Consequently, and broadly speaking, consensus exists that environments that are safe and supportive, that promote challenging and/or interesting activities, that develop a sense of belonging and recognition, and that foster supportive relationships with adults, are among the protective factors that are most likely to moderate against crime. It is against this backdrop that our considerations are contextualised.

### **Phase 1: Initial engagement with sports-based interventions**

In order for participation in sport to be classified as a credible mechanism through which crime might be reduced or be prevented, an important first step is to engage and retain the target population with the sports-based activity itself (Vandermeersch *et al.*, 2013; Morgan & Costas Batlle, 2019). Indeed, as Hartmann and Kwauk (2011) observe, the strategies which are



employed to recruit and engage participants with a sports-based intervention adopt a critical role and assume even more significance within sport-based programmes that are aimed at marginalised, disaffected youth who can be difficult to locate let alone engage. Therefore, and following previously discussed discourses surrounding the role of sport acting as a ‘hook’ to address social concerns (Crabbe et al., 2006; Coalter, 2007; Nichols, 2007; Green, 2008), a number of considerations arise as to how participants should be initially engaged.

The first of these considerations is that the activity or sport(s) that is offered within the intervention must have popular appeal among the targeted participants and cohere with their interests (see Gambone & Arbreton, 1997; Green, 2008). For example, Parker *et al.* (2017) note how the selection of a particular sport within an intervention is critical to not only presenting the metaphorical ‘hook’ for initial engagement, but also to sustain involvement and enable participants to engage with the intervention more deeply to optimise their prospects of acquiring the wider social benefits offered by such interventions. Likewise, Lonie (2011) observes how providing ‘routes of engagement’ within programmes that are popular and interesting to young people may enable participants to demonstrate a particular skill or competence in that activity and foster a more positive sense of self among programme participants to further enhance engagement.

Second, and building upon the above, we suggest that in order for sport to act as a means to prevent crime, the sports that feature within an intervention need to be accessible for a broad range of participants which encompass diversity in terms of need, ability, gender, and demographic background. Accessibility of the activity assumes a greater significance given research that suggests that engagement in criminal activity often occurs due to it offering a more accessible means of ‘entertainment’ than sporting pursuits (Lyng, 2005) which often

exclude certain populations while privileging others. Consequently, providing sporting activities where young people are not restricted in their access and, furthermore, feel competent about their abilities, has shown to be an important protective factor in youth-based interventions (Witt & Crompton, 1997). Other research has noted how the cooperative nature of team sports offers value in further integrating and deepening the involvement of participants within the broader intentions of sports-based interventions (see Coalter, 2013; Parker *et al.*, 2017) to underline the importance of providing activities that are accessible to a broader audience. That said, previous research has also pointed to the need for interventions to cohere with the specific needs of participant cohorts and social contexts (see, for example, Parker *et al.*, 2012) and the necessity for any theory of change framework to be flexible and adaptable enough to both discern and accommodate such needs.

Third, we propose that engagement with sport-based interventions will be enhanced if the youth participants possess a clear sense of ownership and control over the activities that are offered and delivered within an intervention. Literature indicates that where programmes ensure that the overall experience of engagement instils a greater sense of empowerment for its participants, then the likelihood of sustained involvement is increased (see Crabbe *et al.*, 2006; Houlihan & Green, 2009). Similarly, both Coalter (2002) and Coakley (2002) advocate for sport-based interventions to focus upon the empowerment of young people by devolving ‘ownership’ for the programme from associated staff to the recipients of the intervention.

A fourth feature that may enhance initial engagement with a sports-based intervention, is that the activity must provide ‘something different’ by offering a release or a distraction from the routine of young peoples’ lives or by acting as an antidote to boredom. Indeed, some authors have noted how crime can present a form of escapism from the mundane routines of everyday

life, whereby engagement in criminal behaviour serves as a thrill where risks are undertaken for pleasure (Ferrell, 2004; Lyng, 2005). This rationale builds cogently upon Nichols (2007) suggestion that participation in sport can act as a diversion to crime and/or anti-social behaviour, whereby aspects of the sport experience present opportunities to escape the familiar anti-social ‘attractions’ that are commonly available to ‘at-risk’ youth (Crabbe et al., 2006; Green, 2008).

Finally, the environment in which the sports-based intervention occurs needs to be perceived as safe by programme recipients and offer a neutral space where participants can express themselves with confidence, and develop and mature at their own pace. Again, research is unequivocal as to how this factor acts as a protective factor against crime (Farrington & Welsh, 2007) and has long been argued as central to facilitating positive engagement in intervention programmes designed to develop young people through sport (Gambone & Arbreton, 1997; Witt & Crompton, 1997; Coakley, 2002; Crabbe et al., 2006). Indeed, as Coalter (2013) reports, a safe, supportive environment is critical to fostering maturity in young people and that engagement in sport-based interventions may in fact accelerate this process.

In summary, we suggest that initial engagement provides a key mechanism within the professional logic of sports-based interventions which aim to encourage desistance from crime. Consequently, the five considerations above present ideas as to how initial involvement with a sports-based intervention may be facilitated and act as a precursor for a deeper level of engagement with the intervention that is critical to attaining the broader social outcomes of programmes designed to prevent criminal behaviour. However, we recognise that other factors are likely to influence initial engagement with a sports-based intervention. Uppermost here is an individual’s stock of sporting capital (Rowe, 2015), and how a series of physiological, social

and psychological factors<sup>4</sup> support or motivate that individual's participation in sport. Further, we acknowledge that sport, in and of itself, is somewhat limited in its capacity to effect change, and that other factors associated with crime prevention programmes present more important mechanisms in the theory of change. It is to these mechanisms that we now turn.

## **Phase 2: Developing positive interpersonal relationships**

Existing literature that has examined the link between participation in sport and desistance from crime has heavily positioned the importance of strong interpersonal relationships between programme staff and those engaged by such interventions (Crabbe et al., 2006; Coalter, 2013; Morgan & Parker, 2017). Consequently, we propose that the development of relationships which can be used as a platform for additional support and personal development is a salient next step within the programme logic of sport and crime reduction interventions. Of crucial importance here is the necessity to construct relationships that: i) are trust-based; ii) enable participants to feel valued or that recognise the abilities that the young person can offer to the relationship; and iii) promote programme leaders as role models who understand and appreciate the essence of the challenges that programme participants encounter in their everyday lives.

To explore the first of these rationales, previous research has highlighted how relationships built upon trust and mutual respect have been beneficial in facilitating behaviour change. For example, Coalter (2013) highlighted how the social climate created by leaders and coaches enacted a pivotal role in generating trust and reciprocity within the context of a sport-based programme, whereby positive actions were rewarded and recognised by staff. Similarly, Morgan and Parker (2017) outline the way in which the behavioural climate created by the

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<sup>4</sup> According to Rowe (2015), sporting capital consists of an amalgam of physiological factors (including fundamental aspects of physical health and physical literacy), social factors (such as having family and/or friends who perceive themselves to be 'sporty'), and psychological factors (including self-esteem and perceived competence within the sporting domain) that support participation in sport.

leaders of sports-based interventions had the potential to facilitate the building of trust with young people from which a broader sense of recognition and acceptance often developed. In both of these studies, it is noted how coach-participant connections often went beyond the boundaries of the sport setting, facilitating not only a sense of informal recognition but the foundations upon which a genuine sense of acceptance could be constructed. Given that many of the young people engaged by sports-based interventions often lack positive relationships with adults or authority figures (Morgan & Bush, 2016; Morgan & Parker, 2017), the construction and development of trusting relationships is a vital part of these programmes.

A second rationale for the inclusion of strong interpersonal relationships as a key mechanism within sports-based interventions is provided by Whittaker (2010) who proposes that strategies to engage ‘at risk’ youth may need to reconsider how young people are valued and recognised. More specifically, Whittaker (2010, p.78) suggests that instead of utilising formal measures of recognition, such as academic achievement, as the basis for young people being valued within society, more informal structures of recognition such as ‘verbal praise, or simply knowing that someone trusts and believes in you’ is of greater relevance to marginalised youth. Indeed, Rose *et al.* (2012) note how societal definitions surrounding formal structures of recognition often impact negatively on young people, to further de-value, marginalise or stigmatise ‘at risk’ youth. Clearly then, there is logic in examining how sports-based interventions may enable youth participants to be valued within society and engender a sense of belonging and acceptance.

The final rationale that we present for the integration of strong interpersonal relationships within this logic model is based around the need for programme leaders and coaches to possess a clear understanding of the issues of concern within a local community, and, more critically,

recognise how these issues impact on the lives of individuals and families within that local community (Henderson & Thomas, 2013). For Henderson and Thomas (2013), this requires programme leaders to demonstrate a community consciousness, whereby the attainment of any sporting objectives within an intervention become subsidiary to the role of facilitating individual development within programme participants (Coakley, 2002). Again, research indicates how the community consciousness of the leaders of sports-based interventions is pivotal to facilitating any positive programme benefits (see Coalter, 2013; Morgan & Bush, 2016). Consequently, there is logic to suggest that where young people are challenged to think ‘differently’ about their life circumstances and aspirations, participation in a sports-based programme may present a platform for engagement with additional activities that may create pathways away from crime and towards ‘normal’ or ‘conventional’ life transitions (Farrington & Welsh, 2007; Rose *et al.*, 2012), such as education, training and employment.

### **Phase 3: Outcomes related to individual development**

The next phase of the theory of change concerns the intermediate outcomes that individual programme participants may achieve through participation in a sports-based intervention. More specifically, we propose that the accumulation of various forms of capital, which may enable access to (and success within) alternative pathways to crime and anti-social behaviour (Spaaij, 2012; Morgan, 2017), may be acquired if mechanisms proposed previously within the theory of change are present within an intervention. Indeed, as Coalter (2007, p.50) notes, ‘evidence seems to suggest that there is a correlation between communities high in capital and a number of desired policy outcomes: lower crime rates, better health, and lower rates of child abuse’. Consequently, we propose that where sports-based interventions deliver sporting opportunities that stimulate initial engagement (Phase 1) and involve leaders/coaches who develop strong interpersonal relationships with programme participants (Phase 2), it is possible

that participants can reduce (or cease) their involvement in crime by i) developing human capital (Becker, 2006) by being steered towards pathways involving education and training, and ii) developing positive psychological capital (Luthans *et al.*, 2007) by enhancing a number of pro-social qualities such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, personal resilience, and emotional control. In turn, we propose that the accumulation of these forms of capital may enable young people to revise or recalibrate their aspirations and personal ambitions towards more productive outcomes (Crabbe *et al.*, 2006).

The first of these outcomes—developing human capital—coheres strongly with the rhetoric and logic which underpins many policy suggestions to address youth exclusion more broadly, where the primary focus is to encourage an identified population to (re)enter the workforce through the acquisition and development of ‘skills’ (Strathdee, 2013). According to Rowe (2018), positive experiences through sport can enhance reserves of sporting capital, which, through the potential for “transferability of capital” (p.50), can enable human capital to be acquired. Consequently, engagement with a sports-based intervention has potential to accumulate human capital (Becker, 2006) by acting as a conduit to formal educational and training opportunities where participants can develop specific knowledge, skills, attributes and competencies that may equip them for employment or further educational experiences (Strathdee, 2013), whilst further deterring engagement with crime. Further support for this logic is provided by Farrington and Welsh (2007) who observe how academic failure is a major risk factor within youth crime, while other literature notes how the sense of achievement that participants may gain from learning new skills and knowledge may act as a strong protective factor against crime engagement (Anderson & Overy, 2010; Lonie, 2011).

In a similar vein, the enhancement of pro-social qualities such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, personal resilience, and emotional control aligns cogently with notions surrounding the accumulation of positive psychological capital (Luthans *et al.*, 2007) as a further protective factor against crime engagement (Gambone & Arbretton, 1997). While much of the literature pertaining to positive psychological capital is focussed upon how the elements of self-esteem, hope, optimism and resilience may enhance employment opportunities (Luthans *et al.*, 2007), there is clear overlap (and support through the literature) as to how these same elements may aid in facilitating alternative pathways for ‘at risk’ youth and deterring youth involvement in crime (see Morgan, 2017).

It is possible to surmise that the accumulation of human and positive psychological capital may also help to reorient the ambitions and aspirations of programme participants, an equally important outcome to desisting crime. Indeed, one of the prevailing invectives levelled at marginalised youth is the perceived lack of occupational aspiration which is evident in such populations, which may give rise to engagement with criminal and/or anti-social behaviour (Farrington & Welsh, 2007; Finlay *et al.*, 2010). Consequently, the development of formal skills and attributes (human capital) alongside the development of personal qualities which accentuate resilience and a more optimistic or hopeful future (positive psychological capital) may convince young people to renew their aspirations and consider career trajectories which move away from those with criminal foundations. Again, the acquisition of sporting capital may be beneficial and transferable to these other forms of capital (Rowe, 2018). Literature supports this view, highlighting how participation in sports-based interventions holds potential to develop a reimagined sense of aspiration that is critical to social mobility (Coalter, 2013; Morgan & Bush, 2016; Morgan & Parker, 2017).



## **Conclusion**

It has been our aim within this paper to explore the programme logic associated with a practitioner-led theory of change for utilising sports-based interventions in the desistance of youth crime. Consequently, our intent has been to initiate further refinement of this theory of change by outlining the theoretical and academic rationale for the mechanisms which have been proposed to enable the broader social outcome of crime reduction to be realised. In addition, we hope that our exploration will contribute to existing scholarly debate in this area and stimulate the academic community to engage with practitioners in the pursuit of intelligent policy design (van der Knapp, 2004).

In summary, our exploration of the theory of change supports the proposal that young people can be empowered to desist engagement in criminal behaviour provided that the sports-based intervention enables participants to accumulate: i) human capital, to facilitate access to employment and educational opportunities which act as an alternative pathway to crime (Strathdee, 2013); and ii) positive psychological capital to equip young people with an alternative, positive identity, enhanced self-esteem, self-efficacy, renewed ambition and optimism about their future life, along with the resilience and emotional control to cope with set-backs (Luthans *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, we suggest that in order for such capital to be acquired, it is vital that the sports-based intervention concerned contains activities that are both accessible and appealing to youth populations (Green, 2008; Coalter, 2013), and that the personnel who facilitate such programmes must demonstrate a community consciousness (Henderson & Thomas, 2013) that enables them to be skilled in developing interpersonal relationships with programme participants to promote trust and recognition of the positive qualities inherent within a young person (Morgan & Parker, 2017).

To be clear, our exploration is not intended to provide definitive statements about ‘what works’ in this context, nor does it conclude that the presence of the above mechanisms within a sports-based intervention guarantee desistance from crime. Furthermore, we do not subscribe to the view that all sport-based interventions possess the necessary environmental conditions to promote positive change. On the contrary, we recognise that individual experiences of such programmes vary markedly and that the transferability of capital acquired through sport participation may be limited in its conveyance to other domains (Morgan, 2017). Moreover, we would concur with literature that has suggested that other forms of cultural activity (e.g., within the arts) may be better suited to the achievement of outcomes associated with the desistance of crime (see Parker et al., 2018). Nevertheless, we see this exploration as an attempt to move debate forward and to bring academic and practitioner communities closer together in understanding ‘what works?’ (Biesta, 2007).

To this end, systematic evaluative research (Pawson, 2006; 2013) incorporating contributions from both academics and practitioners would appear to be a logical next step to test and refine the propositions presented by the current theory of change. While the challenges of bridging the divide between academic knowledge and thinking with that of their practitioner counterparts is well documented (see Rynes et al., 2001), the application of Gera’s (2012) model of knowledge transfer may provide a useful guiding framework for future debate. Consequently, we appeal to both academics and practitioners alike to recognise the value of synthesising their knowledge and experience to shape the development of theory-based approaches to programme design and community-based interventions in this field.

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